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Plague

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PETE

HE STOOD POISED on the edge of a sheet of glass. Barefoot. Perfectly balanced. One foot in front of the other. Arms at his side. That was the game now.

The sheet of glass went down and down and down forever. Like a shimmering, translucent curtain.

The top edge of the glass was thin, so thin it might cut him if he slipped or fell or took a too-hasty step. That top edge was a thin ribbon of rainbow reflecting bright reds and greens and yellows.

On one side of the glass, darkness. On the other, jarring, disturbing colours.

He could see things down there on the right side, down below his right hand, beyond the reach of his fingers. Down there were his mom and his dad and his sister. Down there were jagged edges and harsh noises that made him want to clap his hands over his ears. When he looked at those things, those people, the wobbly, insubstantial houses, the sharp-edged

furniture, the claw hands and hooked noses and staring, staring, staring eyes and yelling mouths, he wanted to close his eyes.

But it didn't work. Even through his closed eyes he saw them. And he heard them. But he did not understand their wild, pulsating colours. Sometimes their words weren't words at all but brilliant parrot-coloured spears shooting from their mouths.

Mother father sister teacher other. Lately only sister and others. Saying things. Some words he got. Pete. Petey. Little Pete. He knew those words. And sometimes there were soft words, soft like kittens or pillows and they would float from his sister and he would feel peace for a while until the next jangling, shrieking noise, the next assault of stabbing color.

On his left, down, down below the endless sheet of glass, a very different world. Quiet, ghostly things drifted silently, shades of grey. No hard edges, no loud sounds. No horrible colours to make him start screaming. It was dark and so very, very quiet.

Down there was a softly glowing orb, like a faint green sun. It would reach out to him sometimes. A tendril. A mist. It would touch him as he stood balanced, one foot in front of the other, hands at his side.

Peace. Quiet. Nothingness. It would whisper these thoughts to him.

Sometimes it would play. A game.

Pete liked games. Only the left side would play his games his way; games had to be his way, the same way, always and unchanging. But the last game Pete had played with the Darkness had turned harsh and overbright. It had suddenly stabbed Pete with arrows in his brain. It had broken the game.

The sheet of glass had shattered. But now it was whole again, and he balanced on top and as if it was sorry the soft green sun said, *Come down here and play*, in its whispery voice.

On the other side – the agitated, jangly, hard side – his sister, her face a stretched mask beneath yellow hair, a mouth of pink and glittery white, loud, was pushing at him with hands like hammers.

'Roll over. I have to get this sheet out from under you. It's soaked.'

Pete understood some of the words. He felt the hardness of them.

But Pete felt something else even more. A strangeness. An alienness. Something wrong, a deep, throbbing musical note, a bow drawn over strings, that pulled his focus away from the left and the right, away even from the sheet of glass on which he balanced.

It came from the place he never looked: inside him.

Now Pete looked down at himself, like he was floating outside himself. He looked down at his body, puzzled by it. Yes: that was the new voice, the insistent note, the demanding voice

more compelling even than the soft murmur of the Darkness or the jangly words of his sister. His body was demanding his attention, distracting him from his game of balancing on the sheet of glass.

'You're sweating,' his sister said. 'You're burning up. I'm going to take your temperature.'

ONE

72 HOURS 7 MINUTES

SAM TEMPLE WAS drunk.

It was a new experience for him. He was fifteen and had once or twice snuck a sip of his mother's wine. He'd drunk half a beer when he was thirteen. Just to see. He hadn't liked it much, it was bitter.

He'd taken a single hit off a joint back before the FAYZ. He'd practically hacked up a lung and then spent an hour feeling bleary and strange and finally sleepy.

It had never been his thing. He'd never been part of the partying crowd.

But this night he'd gone to check on the caged monster that was both Brittney and Drake and had heard Drake's vile, obscene threats and howling, murderous rage. And then, far worse, he'd heard Brittney's pleas for death.

'Sam, I know you're listening,' she'd said through the barricaded door. 'I know you're out there, I heard your voice. I can't take it, Sam. Sam, end it. Please, I'm begging you,

let me go, let me go to Heaven.'

Sam had been to see Astrid earlier in the evening. That hadn't gone too well. Astrid had tried, and he had tried, but there was too much wrong between them. Too much history now.

He had kissed her. For a while she had kissed him back. And then he'd pushed it. His hands went where he wanted them to go. And she'd shoved him away.

'You know I'm going to say no, Sam,' she said.

'Yeah, I've kind of gotten that message,' he said, angry and frustrated but trying to maintain some semblance of cool.

'If we start, how long do you think it will take before everyone knows?'

'That's not why you won't sleep with me,' Sam said. 'You won't do it because you think it would mean giving up control. And you are all about control, Astrid.'

It was the truth. Sam believed it, anyway.

But if he were being honest instead of just angry, he'd have admitted that Astrid had her own problems. That she was filled with guilt and didn't need one more thing to feel guilty about.

Little Pete was in a coma. Astrid blamed herself, although it was stupid to do so and she was the furthest thing from stupid.

But Little Pete was her brother. Her responsibility.

Her burden.

After that rebuff Sam had stood awkwardly while Astrid

spooned artichoke and fish soup into Little Pete's nerveless lips. Little Pete could swallow. He could walk if she guided him. He could use the slit trench in the backyard but Astrid had to wipe him.

That was Astrid's life now. She was a nurse to an autistic boy with all the power in their world locked inside him. Beyond autistic now: Little Pete was gone. No way to know where he was in his strange, strange mind.

Astrid hadn't hugged Sam when he said he was leaving. Hadn't touched him.

So that had been Sam's evening. Astrid and Little Pete. And the twinned undead creature Orc and Howard kept watch over.

If Drake somehow escaped, there were probably only two people who could take him on: Sam himself, and Orc. Sam needed Orc to act as Drake's jailer. So he had ignored the bottles beside Orc's couch and 'confiscated' only the six-pack in plain view on a kitchen counter.

'I'll dump this,' Sam had told Howard. 'You know it's illegal.'

Howard shrugged and smirked a little. Like he'd known. Like he'd seen some gleam of greed and need in Sam's eye. But Sam himself hadn't known. He had intended to dump the cans out on the street.

Instead he had carried them with him. Through the dark streets. Past burned-out houses and their ghosts.

Past the graveyard.

Down to the beach. He'd cracked the seal, ready to pour one out on the sand. Instead he'd taken a sip.

It burned like fire.

He took another sip. It burned less this time.

He headed up the beach. He knew in his heart where he was going now. He knew his feet were taking him to the cliff.

Now, many sips later, he stood swaying at the top of the cliff. The effect of the booze was undeniable. He knew he was drunk.

He looked down at the small arc of beach at the base of the cliff. The slight surge painted luminescent curves on the dark sand.

Right here, right where he was standing, Mary had led the preschoolers in a suicide leap. All that kept those kids alive was Dekka's heroic effort.

Now Mary was gone.

'Here's to you, Mary,' Sam said. He upended the bottle and drank deep.

He had failed Mary. From the start she'd taken charge of the littles and run the day care. She'd carried that load almost alone.

Sam had seen the effects of her anorexia and bulimia. But he hadn't realised what was happening to her, or hadn't wanted to.

He'd heard nervous gossip that Mary was grabbing whatever meds she could find, anything she thought would ease her depression.

He hadn't wanted to know about that, either.

Most of all he should have seen what Nerezza was up to, should have questioned, should have pushed.

Should have.

Should have.

Should have . . .

Another deep swallow of liquid fire. The burning made him laugh. He laughed down at the beach where Orsay, the false prophet, had died.

'Goodbye, Mary,' he slurred, raising his bottle in a mock toast. 'Least you got outta here.'

For a split second on the day that Mary poofed, the barrier had been clear. They had seen the world outside: the observation platform, the TV satellite truck, the construction underway on fast food places and cheap hotels.

It had seemed very, very real.

But had it been? Astrid said no: just another illusion. But Astrid was not exactly addicted to the truth.

Sam swayed at the edge of the cliff. He ached for Astrid, the booze had not dulled that. He ached for the sound of her voice, the warmth of her breath on his neck, her lips. She was all that had kept him from going crazy. But now she was the source of the crazy because his body was demanding what she wouldn't give. Now being with her was just pain and hollowness and need.

The barrier was there, just a few feet away. Impenetrable.

Opaque. Painful to touch. The faintly shimmering grey dome that enclosed twenty miles of Southern California coastline in a giant terrarium. Or zoo. Or universe.

Or prison.

Sam tried to focus on it, but his eyes weren't working very well.

With the exaggerated care of a drunk he set his bottle down.

He straightened up. He looked at the palms of his hands. Then he stretched out his arms, palms facing the barrier.

'I really hate you,' he said to the barrier.

Twin beams of searing green light shot from his palms. A torrent of focused light.

'Aaaaahhhh!' Sam shouted as he aimed and fired.

The light hit the barrier and did nothing. Nothing burned. Nothing smoked or charred.

'Burn!' Sam howled. 'Burn!'

He played the beams upward, tracing the curve of the barrier. He raged and howled and blazed.

To no effect.

Sam sat down suddenly. The bright fire went out. He fumbled clumsily for the bottle.

'I have it,' a voice said.

Sam twisted sideways, looking for the source. He couldn't find her. It was a her, he was pretty sure of that, a female voice.

She stepped around to where he could see her. Taylor.

Taylor was a pretty Asian girl who had never made a secret of her attraction to Sam. She was also a freak, a three bar with the power of teleportation. She could instantly go any place she'd ever seen or been before. She called it 'bouncing'.

She wore a T-shirt and shorts. Sneakers. Unlaced, no socks. No one dressed well, not any more. People wore whatever was halfway clean.

And no one travelled unarmed. Taylor had a large knife in a nice leather sheath.

She was not beautiful like Astrid. But not cold and remote and looking at him with defensive, accusing eyes, either. Looking at Taylor did not fill his brain to overflowing with memories of love and rage.

She was not the girl who had been the centre of his life for all these months. Not the girl who had left him frustrated, humiliated, feeling like a fool. Feeling more alone than ever.

'Hey, Taylor. Bouncy bouncy Taylor. T'sup?'

'I saw the light,' Taylor said.

'Yeah. I am all about light,' Sam slurred.

She held out the bottle tentatively, not sure what she should do with it.

'Nah.' He waved it off. 'I think I've had quite enough. Don't you?' He spoke with extreme care, trying not to slur. Failing.

'Come sit with me, Taylor, Taylor, bouncy Taylor.'

She hesitated.

'Come on. I won't bite. Good to talk with someone . . . normal.'

Taylor rewarded him with a brief smile. 'I don't know how normal I am.'

'More normal than some. I was just checking on Brittney,' Sam said. 'You have a monster inside of you, Taylor? Do you have to be locked in a basement because inside you is some psycho with a whip arm? No? See? You are so normal, Taylor.'

He glared at the barrier, the untouched, unfazed barrier. 'Do you ever beg to be burned into ashes so you can be free to go to Jesus, Taylor? Nah. See, that's what Brittney does. No, you're pretty normal, bouncy Taylor.'

Taylor sat beside him. Not too close. Friend close, conversation close.

Sam said nothing. Two different urges were battling in his head.

His body was saying go for it. And his mind. . . well, it was confused and not exactly in control.

He reached over and took Taylor's hand. She did not pull her hand away.

He moved his hand up her arm. She stiffened a little and glanced around, making sure they weren't seen. Or, maybe, hoping they were.

His hand reached her neck. He leaned toward her and pulled her to him.

He kissed her.

She kissed him back.

He kissed her harder. And she slid her hand under his shirt, fingers stroking his bare flesh.

Then he pulled away, fast.

'Sorry, I . . .' He hesitated, his wallowing brain arguing against a body that was suddenly aflame.

Sam stood up very suddenly and walked away.

Taylor laughed gaily at his back. 'Come see me when you get tired of mooning over the ice princess, Sam.'

He walked into a sudden, stiff breeze. And any other time, in any other condition, he might have noticed that the wind never blew in the FAYZ.